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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[25 May 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Freedom of Expression

Global Network for Rights and Development welcomes the Panel on Freedom of Expression as a valuable forum and a timely opportunity for discussion of measures required to prevent further infringements of this right. The commitments in this context by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Human Rights Council are central to achieving universal respect for human rights and the consequent development of society.

Freedom of expression plays a vital role in the sustainable development of any society and allows other fundamental rights to flourish. At an individual level, this freedom is basic to the dignity, development and fulfilment of every person while at the national level, freedom of expression contributes to guaranteeing free debate, good governance and overall promotion of human rights. Freedom of expression therefore lies at the heart of any democratic system.

Despite this freedom being of such great importance, freedom of expression is undermined in many different ways. Threats to this freedom are constant under regimes that punish those they consider exceeding the boundaries of freedom of speech. Ad hoc or arbitrary new rules determining what can or cannot be discussed or reported, detention or imprisonment, denial of permits of entry, exit, work or visas are some of the most common weapons used to control journalists and freedom of expression. It is important, therefore, that the Panel's discussions contribute to identifying relevant issues and providing guidance on the steps that need to be taken to minimise or eliminate threats to the freedom of speech and promote full respect for this right. The objective of this statement is to defend and promote Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states that *everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*. It is also important to analyse thoroughly the challenges that this right may face in the future, as technology and liberties that it often affects have developed and evolved in different time frames. After all the progress achieved in human rights matters, there exist still numerous gaps and shortcomings, underscoring a strong need for further cooperation within the international community to continue defending those hard-won rights.

Threats to the freedom of expression are constant. Whilst a good number of countries guarantee this right in their respective constitutions, there remain others that still restrict its exercise. Still other nations profess to protect freedom of speech in written words, ie the law, but in practice are inconsistent in their approach to the defence and preservation of the right to freedom of expression.

Global Network for Rights and Development has documented examples where governments fail to protect such right from abuses. Frequently, those violations emanate from the direct action from states, whose leaders covet power at all costs. This ambition to perpetuate their influence and impose their decisions undermines a substantial number of human rights, specially those related to freedom of expression. According to recent reports, more than a third of the world's population lives in countries where there is no press freedom. This means that more than 2,000 million people still live in countries where there is no system of democracy or where there are serious deficiencies in the democratic process. More than 2,000 million people still suffer strict control of access to information due to the actions of a state-run security apparatus whose aim is to promote propaganda and eliminate any kind of attempts by the media or journalists to challenge the government line, specially on controversial matters.When violations to the freedom of expression do not emanate from the state, they may have their origin in criminal actions.

Violence against journalists and media professionals takes on various forms, such as arbitrary arrest, physical assault, censorship and shutdown of media outlets. Regardless the importance of Article 19, control is very sensitive and important concept in any debate. Freedom of speech is an indispensable right in developed societies, yet it is not an absolute right. Others, such as personal privacy or honour must be properly balanced with freedom of speech.

The Global Network for Rights and Development (GNRD), in accordance with its mission to enhance and promote both human rights and development, works for the application of the rights recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including freedom of expression. Following this line, the organisation has held various events at different levels to stress the importance of the respect for Article 19.

On 3 May 2015, at the World Press Freedom Day, Global Network for Rights and Development co-hosted the Freedom of Speech Awards of Valencia, Spain. The organisation, in accordance with its mission to defend freedom of speech, supported the prize-winning TVE correspondent in Gaza, Yolanda Alvarez, the 17 Palestinian journalists killed in the Strip in the summer of 2014, and the 12 members of the *Charlie Hebdo* staff who died in the Paris attack this year.

Reinforcing the right to freedom of speech and expression and improving the working conditions of journalists are the general recommendations for the future challenges this right may have ahead. From the standpoint of our organisation, all UN member states should support the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. Besides, leadership programmes in journalism, where a selection of top journalists from different regions are brought in to discuss current affairs, exchange ideas and provide updates about the challenges in reporting, should be created. The international community should also place the rights of media workers at the top of its agenda. It is also important to strengthen the employment rights of journalists and other media workers. In this line, fair contracts for all should be provided and the exploitation of freelance workers should come to an end. But the right of journalists, bloggers or any other individual to warn public authorities about the negative effects of interference with critical reporting must be protected and preserved. The progress of technology is another important factor to take into consideration. Despite the advances in communication, which have given rise to new ways of promoting freedom of expression, there is also a substantial number of challenges resulted from evolving technologies. Regarding this matter, the EU Council said "*all human rights which exist offline must also be protected online, in particular the right to freedom of opinion and expression.*"

Freedom of expression is one of the most precious rights included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, indispensable for every human being. Free opinions, thoughts and expressions are major cornerstones of democracy, peace and development of a state. Governments have within their duties the obligation to protect and promote the rights to hold free opinions and thoughts, as well as to facilitate the flow of information through independent media.